

Conceptual Metaphor as a Means for Teaching Critical Thinking Skills

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Abstract

The article addresses the issue of using media discourse as a fertile source for teaching critical thinking skills through discovering information imbedded within linguistic units and evaluating their conceptual meaning. The study focuses on the role of conceptual metaphor with the target domain “others” in constructing a “linguistic worldview” suggested or imposed by language in the American, British and Russian media discourse of the online press. The research reveals that the conceptual metaphor is an effective means for decoding the pattern of thought or the linguistic worldview of bearers of the language. A useful technique that can be employed to facilitate critical thinking skills development is mind mapping as it allows to analyze fragments of linguistic worldview represented by conceptual metaphor.

Key words: linguistic worldview, critical thinking, conceptual metaphor, target domain, source domain, mind mapping

Introduction

A fundamental role of a culturally and linguistically responsive teacher is to help students reach three primary goals. Firstly, we should encourage our students to think critically, question, analyze, and interpret ideas in the context of meaningful issues. Secondly, it is essential to develop the ability to comprehend the underlying conceptual metaphors which can facilitate acquisition of lexis for students of English as a second language, e.g. learning vocabulary denoting common concepts and consulting a dictionary, learners can retain the common metaphorical framework this vocabulary reflects (MEDAL,2007). Thirdly, to perform cross-cultural communication, students should know how the language reflects the worldview of its bearers and their pattern of thought. The aim of the article is to demonstrate how decoding conceptual metaphor may facilitate teaching critical thinking skills to students of English as a second language. The study is founded on the experience of working with Russian-speaking students, and parallels are drawn between the English and Russian languages. However, the technique used may be applicable to teaching any foreign language. The research is conducted within the framework of critical discourse analysis and cognitive approach.

1. Linguistic worldview and conceptual metaphor

The notion «linguistic picture of the world» or «linguistic worldview» is fundamental to understanding a people's perception and linguistic categorisation of the world, social cultural experience and behaviour. Wilhelm von Humboldt was the first to show the interrelation of language, culture and worldview. James W. Underhill, giving new weight to this tradition of the philosophy of language, defines this interrelation as “the paths offered up by the language system to its language community” (Underhill, 2011, p. 11). Language is not the only manifestation of linguistic worldview, as it can also be traced in our behaviour, rituals, art, myth, etiquette, gestures, body language, etc. However, only language offers the ‘well-trodden path’, with ready access to cognition and its mechanisms, due to its function of encoding national cultural experience (Телия, 1996; Lakoff, 1987; Jackendoff, 1983). Linguistic worldview is closely connected with conceptual metaphor, as our worldview is not the exact mirror image of the world around us but an interpretation determined by the prism of our perception.

As an essential component of the conceptual worldview and a cognitive phenomenon, metaphor provides the prism for our perception and cognition. Metaphor is regarded not only as an important element of worldview but as a source of evidence of what this conceptual system is, as well as a tool for its study in the science of language.

1.1 Conceptual metaphor

Human conceptual system is metaphorical in nature, and metaphors shape the way we perceive reality, the way we live (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003a). Our thought is metaphorical, i.e. we use metaphor as a means for comprehending new difficult abstract phenomena in terms of familiar ones. Thus, metaphorical expression implies two domains: source-domain and target-domain. An unknown, difficult target-domain is interpreted or reconceptualized in terms of an easier and more concrete source domain, i.e. “argument is war” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003b). Conceptual metaphor is revealed through regular analogies between target domain and source domain. That is why conceptual metaphor provides a source of evidence of how our cognition works and, moreover, it is also used as a means for changing the way people think, which may result in social consequences.

1.2 Functions of metaphors

Metaphor often extends beyond the sentence serving an organizing function (Koller, 2004). In this case, it is used as “a means of conveying meaning efficiently, and pleasantly, by the association of signs, or through the interaction of more or less complex, basic or conventional, cognitive structures” (Goatly, 2007, 21-22) Cognitive function of metaphor consists in possibility to use metaphors to constitute a certain type of worldview. Within the framework of cognitive approach, the theory of metaphoric archetype was developed (Баранов, Караулов, 1991). Conceptual metaphors may constitute coherent conceptual structures, metaphoric archetypes, with more global content, which are regarded as a phenomenon of higher level and a purely cognitive category. Patterns for description of metaphoric archetypes were suggested which imply identification of target and source domains, scenario (a succession of events typical of the source domain, e.g. the scenario of ‘war’ may include declaration of war, preparation, weapons, conduct of operation, victory, defeat, battle injury or death); frames of the archetype are defined as an element of worldview which structures this conceptual field. The frames of the archetype with the source domain ‘war’ coincide with the abovementioned war scenarios; slots are constituent elements of the frame. Thus, slots of the frame ‘weapons’ may include ‘firearm’, ‘warlike equipment’, ‘ammunition’, etc. (Чудинов, 2001). To characterize the elements of the slot, the author uses the notion of ‘concept’. The concept is regarded as a ‘bit of knowledge, experience, results of cognition’, a cognitive ultimate element. (Кубрякова, 1996, с. 90)

Another function of metaphor is ideological. Modern political media discourse successfully exploits this function of metaphor to conceptualize the world in a certain way or to vary comprehension of reality. This is the case when metaphor is used to reproduce ideological stereotypes, such as the ethnic inequality or a group dominance. Thus, Teun A. van Dijk claims that ethnic dominance is a form of power abuse and media discourse is one of the most effective means of reproduction of such ideology and prejudice (Van Dijk, 2006). Though this type of discourse may nowadays seem more implicit and subtle, it is no less insidious (Barker, 1981).

2. The metaphorical portrayal of “others” in the American, British, and Russian media discourse

We have researched the metaphorical portrayal of immigrants (migrants in the Russian discourse) by analyzing the source domains for the target domain ‘others’ in the American (Циркунова, 2010), British (Циркунова, 2011), and Russian (Циркунова, 2011) media discourse of online American (Newsweek), British (The Guardian, The Daily Mail) and Russian («Аргументы и Факты») quality press on the Internet. In the media discourse of the USA, the source domains for the target domain ‘immigrants’ are ‘people of lower socioeconomic status, inferior people’, ‘cheap labor force’, ‘heavy burden’, ‘threatening strangers’, ‘war’, ‘competitors’, ‘criminality’, ‘natural disaster’, ‘disease’, ‘theater’, ‘animal world’. The metaphorical portrait of immigrants in British media discourse is based on the following source domains: ‘fear’, ‘pressing problem’, ‘heavy burden’, ‘war’, ‘evil’, ‘criminality’, ‘guests’, ‘threatening strangers’, ‘cheap labor force’, ‘competitors’, ‘people of lower socioeconomic status’, ‘inferior people’, ‘natural disaster’. The Russian media discourse uses the following source domains: ‘criminality’, ‘intruders’, ‘cheap labor force’, ‘competitors’, ‘threatening strangers’, ‘war’, ‘people of lower socioeconomic status’, ‘natural disaster’, ‘animal world’, ‘heavy burden’.

3. Common patterns of metaphorical representation in the American, British, and Russian discourse.

The research has revealed 15 source domains: 11 source domains for the target domain 'others' in the American media discourse (AD); 13 – in the British media discourse (BD); 10 – in the Russian one (RD). The three types of media discourse share 8 common source domains:

- 3.1 “Criminality”. This source domain indicates a concern people experience nowadays and, in many respects, it reflects the objective situation. AD – *“some form of legalization or conditional amnesty for the 11 million or so illegals who are already in...”*, *“migrants aren't stealing work from citizens...”*; BD *“A religion is all we share but if we are somehow to blame for what is happening in Britain...”*; RD *«проблема этнической преступности встала в полный рост» (the problem of ethnic criminality emerged full blown), «пусть они лучше молятся, чем курят травку и насилюют девочек» (they'd better pray than smoke weed and rape girls)*
- 3.2 “Threatening strangers”. This source domain emphasizes irreconcilability and religious implacability. It portrays immigrants as strangers, “aliens” threatening national security. AD: *“an “invasion of illegal aliens” that waged “war on the middle class”, “wave of “anchor babies” born to mothers who fly to the U.S. like malevolent storks to inject aliens into our bloodstream”, “fears of “the other”*; BD: *“Britons fear immigration as a threat to national life more than any other European country, new research has revealed”, “the British are also more likely to think that foreign arrivals damaged 'national culture'”*; RD: *“они остаются и будут оставаться чужими” (they still remain and will remain alien)*
- 3.3 “Inferior people”. This source domain shows contemptuous and scornful attitude to immigrants and arrogance of the natives. AD: *“Immigrants, more than U.S.-born workers, tend to be in the second category», «the image of the immigrant- as-freeloader gained wide circulation”, “Tough economic times stoke the public's appetite for scapegoats, and illegal aliens have the unfortunate luck of providing a convenient one”*; BD: *“a large part of the population lives in a shadow world, as sub-citizens, prone to exploitation, fearful of reporting crimes, undermining the minimum wage, unable to access rights and less likely to fulfill their obligations of paying taxes. A large population outside the law benefits no one”*; RD: *«живут в нечеловеческих условиях, у них нет никаких прав, их обирают милиционеры и работодатели» (they live in subhuman living conditions, they have no rights, they get fleeced by employers and militiamen), «низкоквалифицированные рабочие, которые живут на положении рабов» (low-skilled workers living like slaves).*
- 3.4 “cheap labour force”. This source domain looks upon immigrants as an economic factor that can be estimated from the perspective of profits and losses. AM: *“are immigrants good or bad for the economy? The American public overwhelmingly thinks they're bad”, “immigrants lowered the prices in “immigrant- intensive industries”*; BD: *“almost half of British respondents (46 per cent), hit with a wave of so-called 'Polish plumbers' taking advantage of European Union mobility rules”, “there has been a tendency to say 'the countryside is short of people picking vegetables so we need more Romanians' or 'we are short of nurses so we need more Nigerians”* RD: *«мигранты – легалы и нелегалы – стране нужны. Без этого не обойтись. Всегда будет фронт работ, от которого откажутся местные жители. Эту нишу надо заполнять.» (The country needs migrants, both legal and illegal. We can't do without them. There will always be a range of jobs the locals will refuse. This niche must be filled.)*
- 3.5 “Competitors”. The source domain evokes negative associations as immigration may complicate the employment situation. AM: *“although immigrants raised native wages overall, they slightly hurt the 8 percent of workers without a high-school education...”*; BD: *“immigrants are taking jobs from natives”, «it seemed that the word (immigration) as used by ministers is reserved for a very particular type of individual – perceived to be low-status and now, in the current climate, the focus of potential resentment from "British workers”*; RD: *«они создают конкурентную среду, в которой не могут работать те местные работники, которые неоправданно высоко оценивают свой труд.» (they create competitive environment where locals who put an unreasonably high price on their labour can't work)*

- 3.6 “Natural disaster”. This source domain adds to the negative portrayal by depicting immigrants as an uncontrolled and dangerous phenomenon. AD: “*prevent a flooding of the unskilled labor market and blocked large numbers of willing immigrants*”, “*waves of immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and wherever the Grahams came from*”; BD: “*Britain is being swamped by immigrants*”, “*government is doing a 'poor job' to stem immigration*”, “*to curb the flow of skilled workers from outside Europe*”; RD: “*мегаполисы сталкиваются с неконтролируемым потоком мигрантов*» (*the metropolis faces uncontrolled influx of migrants*), «*чтобы они окультурили ту стихийную силу, что представляют собой мигранты*» (*let them civilize the chaos the migrants present*)
- 3.7 “War”. The source domain is based on hostility and intransigence. AD: “*the Latino invasion*”, “*invading hordes*”, “*crusaders against illegal immigration*”, “*the Bush-era raids*”, “*the bill targets illegal immigration*”, “*to trigger anti-immigrant sentiment*”, “*trying to inflame passions about “anchor babies” could backfire*”; BD: “*areas that have never experienced racial tension are now potential scenes of turmoil and violence*” “*the formation of 'hit squads' to go into areas struggling with racial change*”, RD: «*с незваными гостями будут бороться почти как с террористами в этой стране*» (*unbidden guests will be fought almost like terrorists in this country*), “*сейчас основная борьба с нелегалами сводится к периодическим рейдам*” (*now the fight against illegal migrants is restricted to periodical raids*)
- 3.8 “Heavy burden”. The source domain presents immigrants as an economic burden to the country. AD: “*immigrants were a burden on the country because they took away American jobs, housing, and health care*”, “*what worried them most, in other words, was the fiscal burden of immigration*”; BD: “*instead of detaining the Chinese cocklers, UKIS and the DWP allowed them to carry on working in the knowledge that they were not a drain on the state*»; RD: «*около 1.4 млн. мигрантов ежегодно получают в Москве медицинскую помощь без страховки.... А это очень затратный механизм*» (*about 1.4 million migrants receive medical aid without insurance in Moscow annually ... It is a very costly mechanism*)

Thus, metaphorical representation in the three types of media discourse under study is similar to a large extent, sharing 8 source domains out of 11 in the American discourse, 13 – in British, and 10 - in Russian. According to this choice of source domains, “others” are regarded as criminals, threatening strangers, inferior people, cheap labour force, competitors, natural disaster, war, and a heavy burden. The range of source domains demonstrates a negative portrayal of “others” in the three types of discourse under study, reflecting a general negative attitude to these people.

4. Conceptual metaphor as a means for teaching critical thinking skills.

Media discourse can provide much practice for drawing students’ attention to conceptual metaphor, urging them to find out metaphoric expressions, identify target and source domains, group source domains with reference to regular associations, and draw inferences. A useful technique to enhance critical thinking through looking into conceptual metaphor is mind mapping. Mind mapping is a diagram for visual representation of information (Buzan, 2009). Students may write the target domain (e.g. “others”) in the center and draw a circle around it, then connect source domains available for “others” making up the second level, and, finally, connect sub-levels, organizing metaphorical expressions that constitute this very source domain around it.

Developing the mind mapping for the target domain in their first language and target language, students can compare metaphorical representation of concepts, thus, comparing patterns of thought or linguistic worldviews of the bearers of these languages. In our study, we can organize three diagrams that will be similar to a large extent, sharing eight common source domains and indicating similarity in the opinions and beliefs in the three types of media discourse under study. Those source domains that are present only in one particular media discourse signify differences in patterns of thought or linguistic worldview. In our study of the American media discourse, such source domains include “theatre”, “disease” and “animal world”; in Russian – “intruders” and “animal world”; in British – “fear”, “pressing problem”, “evil”, and “guests”. The difference between the Russian and American discourses is not dramatic, while the British discourse offers four source domains, three of which imply very negative connotation reflecting the feelings of fear, anxiety and tension in the community, as British people “fear immigration as a threat to national life more than any other European country” (Hall, 2011).

Conclusions

1. The study was based on the assumption that conceptual metaphor may be an effective means for teaching critical thinking skills because it allows for comparison of fragments constituting linguistic worldview of the bearers of the language.
2. Encouraging students to organize mind mapping representing the metaphoric archetype in the source language and target language facilitates comparison of such fragments of linguistic worldview, allowing the students to identify similarities and differences in perception and cognition of bearers of the languages under study.

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